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PLANNING FOR RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARIES

by
Clara B. Johnson, Nebraska Public Library Commission

"Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir
men's blood and probably themselves will not be
realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and
work."
Daniel H. Burnham

Planning for the development of rural communities may well include planning for rural library service. The complexity of the modern world puts a responsibility on the citizen to educate himself continuously, and on the government to provide the means for the citizen's self education. Books are the tools of learning and therefore libraries are essential.

The need for the development of rural library service in Nebraska is recognized when a few facts are brought to one's attention. Over forty per cent of the people in this state have no local libraries. This large group of citizens without the use of libraries is largely rural. They are the people on farms and in small villages. But even urban residents, none without some library service, are inadequately supplied with books. We scarcely have one book per person in all the public libraries of the state. In many cases the book counted is worn out or outdated. Nebraska spends less than 30¢ per person for library service when \$1.00 per capita is considered minimum.

The success over a period of years of the home demonstration project club reading program has indicated clearly that people on the farms and in the country want to read. Adults want to read for information and recreation and they desire books for educational advantages and home enjoyment for their children. They want books for their men and women coming home from the armed services to help them make adjustments and continue their education.

Reading leaders have found that the problem of promoting good reading in rural Nebraska homes is above everything else, a problem of making good reading matter accessible. Most of the rural residents of the state do not have libraries close at hand as the figures above have shown. To correct this fault a plan of equalized distribution of library services and adequate support for them needs to be formulated.

Planning, then, involves organizing a campaign to secure rural library service. The farm people in Phelps County conducted an information campaign covering the whole county which resulted in their voting a tax for county-wide library service with headquarters in Holdrege, the county seat.

Every resident of the county may have access to the book collection. The books are taken to the people in a bookmobile, a "library on wheels." It visits each place at a specified hour once every two weeks. The librarian routes the stops to bring book service within easy reach of all. Stops are made in every village, at rural community centers, county schools and convenient crossroads. Books of fiction and nonfiction on many subjects for both adults and children are available.

The county library operates economically from one headquarters, for the whole county. In Phelps county the headquarters was established in the Carnegie Library. This system was demonstrated by means of federal funds for a two-year period before a general election. The Phelps county library has given rural people of Nebraska one pattern of rural library service which might be adopted in other counties.

In some parts of the state a regional library would be more effective. A regional library is one in which two or more small counties consolidate their resources so that their citizens may have adequate library service.

Teamwork is well illustrated in the establishment of the Grant county library which was started as the Hyannis Public Library by the Woman's Club there. During the war when local firemen won a \$1,000 bond as prize from the Omaha World Herald in a scrap iron drive, the Fire Chief designated the Grant county library as recipient of the bond. Since a library by such a name was non-existent, it prompted library friends to request a county levy for public library service. It was voted in November 1942 and carried by a good majority. The Grant county library, then, was established in July 1943. With the help of the Woman's Club, Boy Scouts, book clubs, American Legion Auxiliary, farm women's clubs, local church organizations, prosperous ranchers and other friends, the library was set up for business in an abandoned filling station in Hyannis, the county seat.

Rural schools in Grant county used deposits of books from the county library and deposits are also kept at Ashby and Whitman during the school term where they service the entire community both adults and children. The county superintendent assists in delivering and returning deposits and otherwise cooperates.

In Adams county the administration of the county library has been placed under the direction of the Carnegie Library at Hastings. This union of services was started in February 1945 by an agreement between the county board and the Carnegie Library board. The rural population whose library service is paid for by the county tax is served by seven library substations located in the several villages of the county.

The village units of the county library system have balanced book collections supplying reading material for all ages and many interests. The books are exchanged frequently from the central reservoir at the Carnegie Library so that the book stock at each station is kept fresh and interesting. A local person is employed to be in charge of book lending from these Library stations. A member of the staff of the Carnegie Library in Hastings is certified as the county librarian. Rural library service in Adams County as in Phelps county resulted from a successful demonstration project conducted by use of federal money and sponsored by the Nebraska Public Library Commission and local libraries.

Nebraska's county and regional library law provides for the establishment of these area-wide libraries. It is a permissive law which calls for a vote of the people at a general election, (that is, the voters who live outside the cities, towns, or townships that already are taxed for public libraries) to authorize establishment.

It permits two or more counties to cooperate to form a regional library. The law provides that the county board give general supervision of the county library. It enables a tax not to exceed one mill on the dollar of property valuation outside towns maintaining public libraries or to include them if they so elect. Nebraska already has its enabling act. It now rests with the people of the state to secure for themselves rural library service under the provisions of the statute.

Until books are available through county library bookmobiles, until farm people have established rural library service supplying reading material near at hand, the Library Commission provides some long distance book service. The Commission is the state library extension agency charged with the responsibility of assisting in the development of adequate local public library service for every citizen of the state. It also bridges the gap until local library service is available. It lends collections of books to communities and schools or a few books at a time directly to individuals. A little folder called BOOKS BY MAIL gives publicity to Library Commission services and uses this slogan, "If you can't get to a library, let the library come to you." The Library Commission is located in the State Capitol Building, Lincoln. Its staff and book stock are at your service.

The Library Commission points the way to building up complete public library service in Nebraska. The executive secretary may be called upon to explain the county library plan to citizen groups either by correspondence, or when possible, by trips into the field. Actual establishment of county libraries in Nebraska will come when county supervisors are convinced that the whole county wants one, when a majority of the voters cast their ballots for it. So it is in the final sense up to the rural people themselves to plan an effective program of information, publicity and action to provide rural public library service for their own areas.

For further information write to the Nebraska Public Library Commission for any of the following printed material: COUNTY LIBRARY PRIMER; THE EQUAL CHANCE; F. B. 1847 - RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE; LIBRARIES NEED STATE AID; RURAL PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE; BOOKS BY MAIL; IT'S YOUR MOVE; PHELPS COUNTY CUTS A PATTERN FOR RURAL LIBRARY SERVICE.